

New Perspectives on the Evolution of Publics: Digital Stakeholders

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Abstract: The decline of the public man of the industrial era and the rise of the digital communities engage publics in new forms of expression by forming and framing networks that replace political communities. Our identity has changed as far as the public man is falling apart in this liquid era, leaving its structured power to dissipated voices of the interactive media. Networking became a political way of being. Publics' classification differs according to their multiple usages, to their responses and overt behaviors to social stimuli, as well as on the context and situations of interaction. We intend in this essay to define digital publics or audiences as *popular* and to draw a theoretical perspective on their characteristics and behavior.

Keywords: digital publics; public sphere; public relations; stakeholders; conversational publics; non-publics

1. Rationale

The perspectives on new media, being theoretical, empirical or simply pragmatic, are not only divergent but somewhat conflicting. If tackled from the marketing perspective, new media are powerful competitive tools and their audiences or publics, which we call "digital", are treated either as evangelists or as detractors (Wright 2006). As for their social profile, digital publics are rebel, anarchic, dispersed thus unknown until they express themselves. If seen from the esthetical perspective, new media develop new epic expressions, and their digital publics become storytellers and, thus, creators of a particular symbolism of our daily life (Salmon 2008). If analyzed from an economic perspective, they are defined as *prosumers*, since they autonomously produce and consume the public information (cf. Toffler & Toffler 2006). All these public stances are far from being formalized in the theoretical approaches of public relations or in a comprehensive theory of publics. We aim at identifying and describe typical aspects of the digital publics, analyze these publics in terms of profiles, functions, and roles, consider these publics' position in the communication (conversational) process and look for generic dispositions (if not categories) of digital publics engaged in public relations. The premise of our scrutiny is that situational theory of public relations has little relevance for the actual mode of creating the public sphere by the digital publics. As for the methodology, the theoretical views are interdisciplinary but concentrated on

common references in communication sciences. On the other hand, the actual analysis of the categories of publics is not the experimental result of any metrics applied to online users, as it is often the case.

Our aim is to elaborate a meta-description of the functions, roles and aims based on secondary sources, namely on the reflective type of professionals' literature produced by the consultants for online marketing and corporate public relations, whose external position to the process and facts allowed us to see the whole picture and not just small pieces in disorder of the digital puzzle. Nevertheless we are conscious that the bias still exists and some of these consultant works are not more than just "popular" literature concerned with the evolution of various digital audiences, and it does not represent a scientific corpus.

2. Context and Frameworks

The decline of the civil society of the industrial era and the rise of the local communities opposed to the nation-State engage publics in new forms of expressing their interests and opinion, by forming (and framing) multiple flexible networks (Van Dijk 2006). If we follow certain sociological consideration on the evolution of the public sphere, it seems that our identity has changed. The public man is falling apart in this liquid era (Bauman 2007a) leaving its structured power to dissipate voices in the internet. Networking becomes a political way of being (Castells 2010). Compared to mainstream citizens, e-publics are defined according to their practices and internet usage: they act as congregations, practicing various forms of civil evangelism (e.g. through blogging, as producers and consumers of goods, therefore *prosumers* in the economy of web collaboration or *wikinomics*, as individual voices representing local views and often as anti-global militants (organized in e-communes).

Traditionally, we base our concept of public relations on the concept of open and critical societies, being the concept of Jürgen Habermas, K. L. Popper, or proposed by postmodernists like Gianni Vattimo who define the contemporary social order as "transparent". The very concept of managing public relations stands in a set of presuppositions about the detectable condition of the *issues* and the programmable condition of the public in this open, controllable environment, thus on the predefined position of the public sphere, which has an objective existence to be researched, planned and measured against distinct criteria. In opposition to that belief, the digital sphere could be defined as unlimited but not entirely open, nor more democratic if compared to the conventional territories; its e-citizens are more inclined to express their opinion much more in form of beliefs and less by critical arguments. The cognitivist approach of managing public communication (Kapferer 2002; Grunig 1992) seems to be dethroned by a relativistic one (Bauman 2007a : 79-80; Tapscott & Williams [2006] 2010), which gives exclusive importance to the free expression of the local values of these virtual communities (or tribes). Any anthropological study of these social media

would reveal complex ritual-like communications, for which public relations have less instruments of programming, and no single instruments of measuring the impact (except testimonials or narrative evaluation). Public relations become *storytelling* (Salmon 2008), publics themselves are fictional characters in a plot. Narrations and narrators seem to substitute messages and emitting actors. Facts and news have been replaced by sensorial experiences and anecdotes. Even the situational theory of publics (Grunig 1992), one of the most unchallenged theories of publics so far, seems to be inoperative in the digital context, where publics are sensitive to any type of signals as long as it is raised by one of their peers. Public classification also differs from the issue-based models. According to some experimental attempts to define the active consumers through buzz channels, we learn that active buzz publics can be categorized as *Alphas* (informed, attentive and innovative persons, as well as influencers) and *Bees* (rapid adopters and connectors) : “bees are your broadcast platform” (Salzman et al. 2003 : 51). Speculating on the classical model of the diffusion of innovation by Everett Rogers ([1962] 2003: 49), the same authors imagine a buzz continuum through which publics are defined according to their connection speed as follows: Lunatic Fringe (2%), Alphas (8%), Bees (20%), Mainstream (50%), Laggards (20%). As for the process itself, other authors choose theoretical approaches, calling a distinctive logic of new media characterized by “transparent immediacy” (Lagerkvist 2009: 7, with reference to Bolter and Grusin 1999). The effect of identification seems to be similar to those produced by computer games, an emotional identification between the medium and the user, which makes the medium itself an interactive user and the audience a producer of sense. Such a model challenges the very concept of symmetry connected to the excellence theory of public relations (Grunig 1992), since *immediacy* represents a spatial representation of the self and it is irrelevant to the power engaged in the communication process.

On the other hand, new media are seen as a new source of power, especially by the marketing gurus, who consider the speed of propagated information (e.g. the twittering speed) the most fearful instrument for competitors (Comm & Burge 2009). The messages are “tweets” and they look like *signals* more than news. The publics become interconnected in myriapod configurations and the twitter posts are measured by the influence exerted by the *influencers* over the *followers*. A public defined in terms of *followers* acts more like a congregation, expressing faith more than critical reasoning in the Habermasian public sphere. The process is described as an endless conversation (similar however to the fuzzy logic of the children’ dialogue) : “Don’t worry about writing something silly – remember, tweets can be deleted too – but focus on making them entertaining, interesting, and fun” (Comm & Burge 2009: 214). On the contrary, the *influencers* create content with the intended aim of changing opinions. They are subject to measurements and hierarchies, and various techniques in computing sciences aim at identifying the most influential users. As an example, we choose to cite the study of Bigonha et al. (2010). For their study on the optimal detection of evangelists and detractors on Twitter, the authors worked with a dataset of 14,127 tweets from

12,069 users tweets regarding 13 different soda brands, posted by Brazilian users between August 2009 and September 2009, out of which they identify 17 influencers. The researchers' aim was to propose a new measurement technique for ranking the most influential users in Twitter, "based on a combination of the user position in the network topology, the polarity of her opinions and the textual quality of her tweets" (Bigonha et al. 2010: 107). Their metrical study also demonstrated that the interactions of users, such as *mentions*, *replies*, *re-tweets*, *attributions*, was a better representation of their influence than their connections (*follower*, *following*).

Charlotte Brownlow and Lindsay O'Dell's qualitative research (2002) on the ethical issues in the online forums of autistic persons, reveal the equal treatment of the online communities. These communities are more inclined to horizontal (non-selective) exchange with all connected participants, including the researcher, once the consent is obtained:

The nature of online discussion groups means that they can consist of a wide range of people offering several discourses surrounding a topic. Discourses that can be accessed range from 'expert'/professional knowledge, to experiences of family members and those directly affected. Online discussion groups may therefore provide an alternative pool of language resources from which to draw identities. (Brownlow & O'Dell 2002: 17)

If we were to quote only these two different approaches, applicable to two different online practices (signal based like twitter vs. dialogic or narrative forms like forums, blogs or Facebook), we would find that a comprehensive method of analysis cannot detect the irregularities of so many forms of online connectivity.

3. Public Spheres and Popular Publics

"The rise of communalism in its different forms weakens the principle of political sharing on which democratic politics is based" (Castells 2010: 367). *Informational politics*, the concept launched by Castells to describe the dissolution of the political sphere into an undetermined media sphere, engages citizens in a different use of public power and deepen the crisis of the contemporary (liberal) democracy (cf. Held 1987; Boltanski & Chiapello 2011). The change is so radical that the very concept of citizenship is radically challenged for being too close to the notion of State as a political community. Media politics undermines the politics and transforms the formation of public opinion.

By intellectual tradition, we define publics as the core concepts of public relations. Definitively the most sensible definition had been formulated by John Dewey in 1927 (cf. Dewey 2010), who is underlying the democratic vocation of publics : publics are the *third parties*, those having no stake in dispute but engaged in monitoring and controlling the public issues. By this definition, the publics are the watch dogs of the political community helping in the process of governance (they act indeed as a third

party between the administrators and the interest groups). On the other hand, mass-media do not engage publics but “audiences”, a term that by its etymology¹ refers to *listeners* or *auditors* and not to active groups dealing with issues and problems. This contemplative state is also specific to conversational or epic characters (e.g. the classic conversational stance in the Arab stories of *One Thousand and One Nights*) in which characters evolve and acquire a higher moral condition through moral reflection and conversation. In opposition, the deliberative acting state remains specific to both publics and consumers. The former category is interested in the ratification of the political common issues, while the latter includes people concerned with their own well-being.

Are there media publics, and from all, are digital media concerned with issue publics or with popular audiences? From all we know (Castells 2010), media cultures dilute both the public sphere and the public man (cf. R. Sennett in his book, *The Fall of Public Man*, 1978). Do digital media (compared to traditional media) recover and empower publics? We should examine first and define publics before admitting any new return of the *public* into the public life:

1. During the Greek and Roman Antiquity the publics had been defined by their class, status and privileges; from the first Roman royal regimes the city defends the liberties of its free citizens, the civic power is due to the paternal line of descendants (organized in *gents*) and the freemen act on behalf of their organization in “*curies*” (men’s gatherings) ; during the Republic, the foundation of the rule of magistrates consolidate the civic participation, the mandate of the consuls being limited, and the role of tribunes (defendants of plebeian groups) being sacrosanct. The 300 (to 900 later on) members of the Senate rule over the domestic life.
2. The Middle Age and the Renaissance consolidate class element and add the moral divide between people, making the religious virtue the equivalent of the public power.
3. The Enlightenment period has for the first time introduced a philosophy of the natural causes and rights and has ended by promoting the social contract and the doctrine of universal rights and liberties.
4. Early industrial life is ruled by the force of commercial and industrial congregations. The written press, from its early manifestation press, stimulates the development of an intellectual audience emancipated from the urban spectators in the public places, such as the streets and the squares (plazas) of pre-modern times.
5. Modern industrial times raised the ideal of media control over the politics (cf. movies about the media mission like *Citizen Kane* in 1941 or more recently *Good night and good luck* in 2008, as examples of the media power over the political

¹ lat. *audientia*, ae = listening; lat. *audio*, -ire = to hear; to listen; to find out; to have been nominated, to have acquired a (good) reputation; lat. *auditor*, ōris = listener, auditor, disciple.

communities) and eventually the media politics as such. At the same time the corporation roles increase with media control.

Where is the role of the public in all these époques? Sometimes its presence is revealed by its class obligations, sometimes by its interests and motifs, or by the need of engaging in power positions. Its public qualities were external to its individual nature, as public response differed according to the personal response to the facts of life. Publics had been defined by their rational states and by their political stakes. Whenever irrational, publics became *crowd*, *mob*, mass, indistinct mix of people, mood, and distress. Therefore, we carefully distinguish mass communication from public communication, not only in terms of interaction (unilateral vs. bilateral, asymmetric vs. symmetrical) but also in terms of the quality of the public opinion. Popular publics are therefore defined as hybrid groups manifesting mob features (such as fanaticism or fundamentalism) as well as public features (such as the rational capacity of political acting so to express power).

4. Digital Networks as Popular Publics

According to the authors of *Wikinomics* (Tapscott & Williams [2006] 2010), digital networks are not necessarily defined as popular groups, but elites, self-defined not by class heritage or selection, but through a social self-selection based on interests and public performance. At the same time, the authors consider that digital networks are collaborative by nature (therefore not exclusivist groups), not segregated by status or merit, opposed therefore to the nature of the modern democratic sphere that is meritocratic and exclusive. It is a contradictory presentation, once again depicting the hybrid nature of the e-publics who seem to be marked by “unstructured structures”. Not interested in copyright and protection of the intellectual property, the digital networks are fascinated by the collective work in itself, like “bees” (metaphor of the buzz conceivers, cf. Salzman et al. 2003, chapter 2 *et passim*). The term *buzz* connected to the form of communication of these publics is not a poetic license; it is an accurate description of their collaborative nature. Several questions may be addressed. Does it have more value than individual intellectual property? Does the “flat” world (cf. Friedman 2006) have more communicative substance than the hierarchical world? Is this buzz productive or a simple matter of “noise” (in the classic theories of language, we distinguish meaningful signals from the noise accidentally or deliberately produced by the channel)?

From the linguistic point of view, the buzz is no more than noise or the activation of the phatic function of the language in the best case (the communicators verify the availability of each other as well as the quality of connection through of the channel). A great amount of comments in the blogging and microblogging sphere is indeed nothing else than noise. On the other hand, there are instruments like twittering or short messaging (SMS or MMS) often cited as the most effective engagement tools (Comm

& Burge 2009: 91, *et passim*). Used as marketing instruments or for general economic purpose, the networks became profitable for branding and marketing communication (Lindstrom et al. 2002). Most of us would have the perception of digital publics as clubs or entertainment groups. On the contrary, they have a clear pragmatic direction: the information economy equals with informational politics.

5. Towards a Typology of Popular E-Publics

Labeled by Lindstrom (2002) as “communities” and not defined by external (experimental) variables and attributes, the digital publics cannot be segmented nor analyzed in a uniform approach. These publics are singular, unstable, unpredictable and circumstantial. Some forms of digital communities emerge from a number of different sources, not necessarily scientific by nature or intent. The classification highly depends on the authors’ experience and on the quality of the analysis – some are more trivial than others, most of the works being provided by consultants who often neglect the scientific grounds and aim at the vulgarization of the practice in order to reach the practitioners and the uninformed public:

1. The “prosumers” or the digital producers & consumers: publics that produce information *per se* or to sustain information industries (like IBM or Intel, cf. Tapscott & Williams [2006] 2010). These are the most active and motivated publics, probably the only actual publics in the digital sphere. The appearance of a collective type of work should not deceive the analyst. The *prosumers* represent the ultimate bastion of the liberal capitalism disguised in social forms.
2. The buzz creators (the “alphas” and the “bees”): conversational publics whose role is to create an atmosphere and to initiate relationships (cf Salzman et al. 2003: 56-57, *et passim*).
3. The twitters and the respective followers (on tweets): conversational publics whose role is to respond and create reputation; probably one of the most effective forms of digital endorsement; also subcategorized in “top fans”, “promoters” or “evangelists” (Comm & Burge 2009: 125).
4. The blogger and the blog “visitors”: commentators of news defined by the newsworthy character of their visit (significant in business blogging): “The Barber” (sharer of collective wisdom, outsider to the company). A former classification belongs to Jeremy Wright (2006): “The Blacksmith” (inside analyzer of the company); “The Bridge” (a communicator par excellence, including the public relations person); “The Window” (a framing commentator of issues on both sides, inside and outside the company); “The Signpost” (an erratic commentator who indicates more than shares); “The Pub” (the discussant).

5. Activists (or the *media publics* as their presence is connected to pseudo-events and large media coverage): pseudo political publics who engage themselves in public issues (typical for NGOs and political campaigning, similar to electoral publics of cheerers and jeerers in the American model of political marketing: “Cheerers and jeerers are on stage to provide the chance for interesting footage” (Castells 2010: 374). Active in grass roots campaigns, digital media networks are easy to manipulate and often digital publics play the role of influencers and propagandists as described in the early works of Edward Bernays ([1928] 2007 ; cf. Jacques Ellul 1990).
6. Non-publics (traffic users): commentators with no conversational stake (whose presence is inconceivable in classic tales and stories or conventional storytelling) like *drive-by* visitors in blogging. They normally count as traffic users whose amplitude is measured in public relations. Paradoxically we analyze them as active publics in longitudinal studies and measure the increased power of the digital influence based on their public weight not on the relevance of their contribution. As a matter of fact, due to the decline of the representative publics, the public relevance of the issue becomes less and less important compared to the public opportunities to speak (often on irrelevant matters). This is why the bloggers themselves tend to be cautions while celebrating the high traffic as the sole value of their news and disregard the mass conception that values the traffic measurement *in abstracto*, not connected to the specific content: “However, traffic doesn’t matter all that much, because if you’re building a valuable conversation, it doesn’t really matter if it’s with 2 people or 200. Also, the *number* [italics in orig.] of visitors doesn’t matter as much as the *quality* [italics in orig.] of those visits, how influential visitors are, and how much they contribute to the conversation and to your company.” (Wright 2006: 243).
7. “I” publics: specific to large networks of friends like MySpace, Facebook, or LinkedIn, or to individual (non-corporate) bloggers, these publics focus on defining and promoting their own profile, writing for massive audiences, solitary people sharing the illusion of being heard by vast populations in the virtual space. They often start raising an important issue, attract groups of “friends” for a short interval, sometimes they stagnate lacking the capacity for long lasting debate: “fatigue is one of the biggest dangers for a mature blog...” (Comm & Burge 2009: 169). Friendship is a peculiar term to us, since the psychological term is used to define affectionate inclination to someone alike. They are however active publics, not to confuse them with apathetic publics in Grunig’s definition, sometimes used in online advertising to commence a publicity talk or in negative public relations to attack a competitor. The behavior of these writers is different, most “I” or ego centered publics being subject of renewal by other social means, like twittering, which is suggested as a tool for countering the menace of loneliness in blogging. “I” publics can also be independent bloggers not interesting in sharing ideas or engage

in conversation but in pointing out aspects of interest (labeled as “the Signpost” by Jeremy Wright 2006 : 94) or (rarely) deviant persons.

As a preliminary remark, we may note that all denominations correspond to different social networks or to different observers of the phenomenon. In public relations, we do not detect an effort to define the new categories of online communities as publics. James Grunig, one of the most prominent figures of the discipline, appreciates that digital communication does not have a paradigmatic impact on the situational theory of the publics:

From a theoretical perspective, in addition, I do not believe digital media change the public relations theory needed to guide practice, especially our generic principles of public relations. Rather, the new media facilitate the application of the principles and, in the future, will make it difficult for practitioners around the world not to use the principles. (Grunig 2009: 3)

On the other hand, the Anglo-American literature of public relations does not refer to the notion of “popular publics”. Most of the ethnographic studies are concerned with the profiles of the online users and less interested in the nature of the public relations processes. As the techniques of communication are concerned, word-of-mouth remains the core aptitude of digital communities. Classic models, such as Katz and Lazarsfeld’s theory on the two step flow of communication and the role of the opinion leaders, validate the strategic role of oral and interpersonal communication in all actions engaging opinion leaders (in Kapferer 2002: 101). One question is still not answered: are online commentators effective opinion leaders in circumstances similar to conventional practices? These collaborative flat communities seem to be neutral and not engaging in any vertical exercise of power (in which the public sphere is stratified), they present a layer of informal and credible influencers whose distinct role is to penetrate other strata of publics.

The scope of our discussion is to examine to what extent these publics correspond or not to the organizational paradigm in public relations. It is obvious that these publics are not linked to any forms of organization, they escape from any organizational enclosure, therefore their presence contradicts with the organizational paradigms that conceive publics and public relations in connections to organizations and organized groups.

6. Discussion

In their chapter on “The Development of a Structuration Analysis of New Publics in an Electronic Environment”, Cozier and Witmer (2001: 615-623) attempt to redefine publics away from the situational theory of publics consecrated by Grunig et al. in precedent collective studies (Grunig & Repper, in Grunig 1992: 117-150). They discover some theoretical limitations concerning the organizational roles of publics, among which : 1) the views on organizations and its publics as discrete bounded

entities (instead of conceiving a “recursive relationship between them”) ; 2) the definition of the public as issue or problem-centered, neglecting the communicative processes in which people engage (like shared or re-creation of experiences) as well as the proper segmentation of publics; 3) there is little consideration on the factors that “influence the development of a public’s dominant ideological stance” (Cozier & Witmer 2001: 617). In response to the situational theory, the two authors propose a “structuration approach” (based on Anthony Giddens’s sociological views on the logic of social actions), and advance the notion of “disembedding mechanisms” to define web publics (especially newsgroups) : “A Usenet newsgroup, for example, can take the form of disembedding mechanism as participants disembed local practices from external organizations and from online interactions and re-embed them within the context of the newsgroup postings.” (Cozier & Witmer 2001 : 620). The arguments of the authors support the idea of group dynamism and versatility and accentuate the reflexive role of the publics (which has not been denied by Grunig either in his consideration about digitalization). Moreover, it becomes more explicit in terms of actors’ motivation, “[...] that explicates a new public’s motivational context and meaning constitution; its communicative nature; and its production, reproduction, and transformation.” (ibid.).

Despite the validity of this structuration and motivational correlated model, the approach remains rational and based on social logic, while most of the actions of digital publics are irregular and unpredictable, to such an extent that we ought to review the opinion formation cycle and wonder if programming issues addressed to the erratic presence of popular publics is still a realistic goal of public relations. Although we fully agree to move away from the mass communication theories and disregard generic issues in defining the new publics, a new modeling of digital publics based on logic and rational (even ideological) stance does not change the paradigm. Situational or structural, the two theories share the same epistemic ground. Any rational modeling of the digital publics will neglect the actual experiences of these publics. Digital publics, as all popular publics, act emotionally more than rationally, they relate to each other more than informing each other and their strategy of influencing is based on applying the pressure of the network instead of using discursive (motivational) techniques. Moreover, we cannot comprehend by a single model the array of publics and experiences engaged through social media. We have seen from the previous inventory of denominations and categories that each community engages different publics with different member denomination, and the logic of each community seems to be consequently different from the others. The hypothesis on disembedded publics deserves a different demonstration to be confirmed. It should be developed in a multi-approach theory since a single meta-model is insufficient to capture the distinctiveness expressed by these multiform groups.

Developing theoretical models in public relations is not an easy mission. The theoretical limitations in analyzing the models of the persuasive communication

industries like advertising, marketing or public relations have been raised by other authors. In his chapter on “Science, Public Relations and the Media”, Vincent Campbell states that “these domains remain dominated by highly simplistic and mechanistic approaches to the construction of persuasive communication campaigns” and part of the problem “lies in the gap between scientific processes of knowledge construction and everyday processes of knowledge construction” (in L’Etang & Piecza 2006 : 213). This gap is even more severe in the process of understanding new media and digital publics, as they are defined exclusively according to day-by-day practices. In this case, generalizing their practices by means of single interpretive model would be also against people’s wish for authenticity.

Our proposal is definitively in favor of a personalized approach, aiming at integrating and responding to distinct experiences of each community. The optimal perspective is more anthropological than managerial or organizational, oriented towards capturing the discussion themes around various forms of public engagement (as expressed by the public themselves) and applying the communities’ specific protocols in communication (contrary to the centrality of the persuasive models which remain limited in their multi-relational scope of action). There is no single model of defining digital publics (who continue to proliferate in number and experiences), consequently there is no dominant strategy in *e-PR*. If conventional public relations may be well based on discourse legitimacy, electronic public relations should be more concerned about challenged identities. The content of the message (or discourse) is no longer the focus of digital communication. The expression of self in the electronic public sphere becomes crucial. This is why the most relevant applications for revealing the publics’ presence in their virtual word are based on Goffman’s theory of the expression of the Self in everyday life (or make use of lateral models from the interpersonal psychology, like transactional analysis). The most relevant change in public relation is the move from an impersonal, interest based or issue based public sphere to a personal (network based) open sphere.

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